ROBERTS MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 15,090 acres

The Roberts Mountain Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (NV-060-541) is located in the Roberts Mountains in Lander and Eureka Counties approximately 40 miles northwest of Eureka, Nevada. The WSA includes 15,090 acres of public land with no privately owned inholdings.

The Roberts Mountain WSA is irregularly shaped and surrounded on three sides by major valley systems. The western boundary is formed by various topographic lines and cherrystem roads. The south and southeast boundaries are formed by roads and trails. The rest of the eastern boundary follows ridgelines, roads and drainages. The northern boundary is formed by topographic lines. The Roberts Mountain WSA consists of the rugged mountainous area of the Roberts Mountains and contains three prominent peaks. Vegetation consists of willow, cottonwood, aspen, birch, and dogwood trees in the deep narrow canyons. Mountain mahogany trees and limber pine are found in isolated stands on the barren rock ridges.

The Roberts Mountains are the geologic model or Type Locality of the Roberts Mountains Thrust, a major geologic fault structure in North America. The area has been referred to as "the Window of the World" because of the unique view it gives of the complex geologic structure of the region. This special feature is used not only by professional geologists as a model but by students, amateurs and rockhounders to team about geologic resources. Because of its rare qualities and geologic importance, university students and well known geologists from Kansas, California, other universities and other nations have studied this area for many years.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 0 acres recommended for wilderness
15,090 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation for this WSA is to release all 15,090 for uses other than wilderness.

This recommendation differs from the Proposed Action (All Wilderness Alternative) analyzed in the Shoshone-Eureka Resource Area Final Wilderness Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) where all 15,090 acres were recommended as suitable for wilderness.

Before the FEIS was completed, the U.S. Geologic Survey and Bureau of Mines (USGS/BOM) report, U.S. Geologic Survey Bulletin 1731-K, was published. This report assigned a high resource potential rating (gold and silver) to three small areas in the southeast corner of the WSA. The area around the WSA has received significant interest from the minerals industry and test drilling has occurred up to the boundary of the WSA.

Based on the USGS/BOM report and the determinations in the FEIS, the BLM reasoned that wilderness values in this area outweighed the value of potential mineral development, after carving out any portions of the WSA with potentially high mineral values. Consequently, the BLM recommended to the Secretary of the Interior, Manuel Lujan, that the Proposed Action identifying 15,090 acres suitable for wilderness designation be adopted.

Upon review of the Bureau's recommendation by the Secretary, the Secretary reversed the Bureau's recommendation from 15,090 acres suitable for designation to "0" acres suitable for designation as wilderness. The Secretary cited as his rationale a USGS report which assigned a gross value to in-place minerals in WSAs. This report was entitled "Quantitative Assessments of the Energy and Mineral Resources Within Eighteen Wilderness Study Areas in the States of Colorado, Nevada, Oregon, and Utah." In 1993, a select USGS commissioned panel recommended "the USGS discontinue the practice of providing gross in-place values to those making land use decisions." Further, the panel said the report ". . . is not a useful measure of the social value of mineral resources." Accordingly, the report was not useful as a basis for decisions about wilderness designation.

Shortly thereafter, several wilderness groups, represented by the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, filed suit against Secretary Lujan requesting that the Secretary reconsider the decision to drop the WSA from the Department's recommendation to the President of areas deserving permanent protection as wilderness. In 1994, a settlement was reached whereby Secretary Babbit agreed "to take a fresh look at all BLM candidate wilderness areas as designation bills are taken up by Congress.

When a "fresh look" is taken, the Roberts Mountain WSA could be recommended for wilderness because it offers outstanding wilderness values not common in central Nevada. The outstanding wilderness values of naturalness; the unusual variety of vegetative communities; the spring fed ponds; the outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation; the natural arches and small caves; along with the prominence of geologic features in the Roberts Mountain Thrust, and one of a kind paleontological probability would make the Roberts Mountain WSA an outstanding addition to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The Roberts Mountain WSA is generally in a natural state. The Roberts Mountain WSA consists of the rugged mountainous area of the Roberts Mountains and contains three prominent peaks. The Roberts Mountain WSA is irregularly shaped and surrounded on three sides by major valley systems. Vegetation consists of willow, cottonwood, aspen, birch, and dogwood trees in the deep narrow canyons. Mountain mahogany trees and limber pine are found in isolated stands on the barren rock ridges. Within the boundaries of the WSA are approximately 2.5 miles of vehicle ways and three fences. A small mining prospect was found on the western side of the unit, but is substantially unnoticeable in the unit as a whole. The nature of these intrusions does not warrant their exclusion.

B. Solitude: The Roberts Mountain WSA provides an outstanding opportunity for solitude. Spread over an extremely jagged and varied topography, the unit is characterized by narrow, deep canyons forested with willow, cottonwood, aspen, birch, and dogwood trees. Barren rock ridges and isolated stands of mountain mahogany and limber pine combine with the canyons to offer abundant natural screening and offer many opportunities for the user to find a secluded spot. The Roberts Mountain WSA offers a wide diversity of terrain, vegetation, and scenery. The massif consists of a series of rugged peaks forming a broken ridge. Numerous canyons and valleys surround the ridge breaking the unit into several areas.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The Roberts Mountain WSA offers outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation. The Roberts Creek/Vinini Creek, Willow Creek and Dry Creek areas offer slopes of varying degrees and a variety of scenic attractions for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Suitable snow depths usually occur throughout this area.

Horseback riding is fairly easy on the eastern portion of this area and access to the bowl just below the peak of Roberts Mountain is not difficult. For extended travel, one can climb out of the bowl and drop into the Pete Hansen or Dry Creek drainages.

There are a number of small caves above Roberts Creek. Most are located on cliff faces and may require some degree of rock climbing ability. The rocks are Devonian sedimentaries with numerous fossils and may be crumbly.

The Roberts Mountain WSA exhibits an unusual variety of vegetative communities in proximity to one another. Because of the rapid change in elevation, a visitor can find a sub-alpine herbaceous sage community, a northern desert shrub community, a pinyon/juniper tree forest, and a scattered boreal forest of limber pine all within this 15,000 acre WSA. Hiking, rock climbing, backpacking, nature study, hunting, and photography are all activities that can be enjoyed in this WSA.

D. Special Features: The Roberts thrust, responsible for the mountain's existence, is one of the great structural features of the intermountain west. This provides for excellent geological study. Universities as far away as Ohio and Nebraska, and students from England and China have participated in geologic field trips and mapping exercises during the summer months. The main scientific values of the area are its "window on the mantle" characteristic, a geological formation associated with the Roberts Mountain Thrust Fault, and the ecological island aspect of the higher elevations.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The Roberts Mountain WSA is considered to be manageable over the long-term. This WSA has two types of management problems: mining claims and the potential off-road-vehicle use. Post-FLPMA mining claims covering 2800 acres are located along the south and eastern boundaries. All but 140 acres were filed in 1983 and 1984. Mineral exploration is high and some of these claims could be developed. Closure of one way may present a problem because it will be difficult to prevent ORV use of this way.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The US Geological Survey and the US Bureau of Mines investigated the Roberts Mountain WSA and published the USGS Survey Bulletin 1731-K.

There are three areas of high mineral resource potential for gold and silver with gradational areas of moderate and low resource potential in silicified dolomite beneath the Roberts Mountains thrust along part of the eastern edge of the wilderness study area. Silicified and altered dolomite in an area about 2 ½ miles west of Roberts Creek Mountain has moderate to low resource potential for gold and silver; and an area along the southwest edge of the study area about 3 ½ miles west of Roberts Creek Mountain has moderate resource potential for gold and silver in the same geologic setting. Gold and silver mineralization in altered dolomite and limestone associated with faulting that is younger than the Roberts Mountains thrust is found in the central part of the wilderness study area and near several large faults in the western part of the study area. These areas have moderate potential for gold and silver resources. No known energy mineral deposits exist in the wilderness study area and there is little or no likelihood of hydrocarbon resources in or beneath the study area.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA - SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

Public involvement has occurred throughout the wilderness review process. During formal public review of the draft EIS, a total of 16 comments specifically addressing this WSA were received. Seven individuals and five environmental organizations favored the Roberts designation and one mining organization, two mining companies and the local county commission opposed this designation.

Reasons for supporting a wilderness designation were; outstanding wilderness values, minimal conflicts, most spectacular area, all the stuff of a classic wilderness, North America's finest marine fossil beds.

Reasons for supporting nonwilderness were; key to economic mineralization in Nevada, one site in the whole state that has one of the best exposures of strata form gold deposits, strong association with nearby Mount Hope mineralization.

The State during its consistency review commented: "...we remain concerned about the impacts of wilderness designation of the Roberts Area. We acknowledge the unique geological, paleontological and scenic values of the area and feel strongly that they should be protected. However, the mineral potential of this area could be extremely valuable to the State in the future. We, therefore, have suggested that the Bureau seek other means of protection for the area, short of wilderness designation".